The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film

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CINEPROBE

An Evening with Sidney Peterson

Tuesday, June 25, 1974

Screening of CLINIC OF STUMBLE (1947, 18 minutes, choreography by Marian Van Tuyl); THE PETRIFIED DOG (1948, 19 minutes); MR. FRENHOFER AND THE MINOTAUR (1949, 21 minutes); THE LEAD SHOES (1948, 18 minutes). 76 minutes. Peterson's films are available from the Film Division of Grove Press, New York City.

The filmmaker will be present after the screening for a discussion with the audience.

"Sidney Peterson is widely traveled and is widely educated. He started out to become a sculptor then went to sea for several years, changed his mind again and studied medicine at the University of California for three years, after which he went to work for a newspaper. He next became a draftsman for a naval architect but left this in order to make a movie with James Broughton. Meanwhile he was writing on various topics, such as the religious life of a lunatic (unpublished), psychoanalytic aspects of English literature, and the visual prospect of London. He founded a film company in Seattle, spent two years with the Museum of Modern Art as a television director and writer, founded Workshop 20, and ultimately went to Hollywood where he wrote cartoon scenarios for UPA and Walt Disney...From Hollywood he moved to San Francisco where he wrote a novel, ~~The~~ A Fly in the Pigment (published in 1961). Since then he has been writing.

Sidney Peterson's first film, THE RED ROOF, was made in 8mm; he made it in the mountains while on vacation with a medical friend, 'pushing the button' himself a few times, the two of them then getting it into shape on the livingroom floor. His next creative project was a play in collaboration with James Broughton in 1945-46 but this was abandoned by the authors to begin THE POTTED PSALM...As a result of the reception of THE POTTED PSALM, Douglas MacAgy, then the Director of the California School of Fine Arts, invited Peterson to run a film workshop in the school that should stimulate students of painting by providing contact with a different visual medium. Again, the dialectic of collaboration was felt in his work. Believing he was not as yet a dependable photographer, he got Hy Hirsh to handle the camera for the first film he made at Workshop 20 (as his course was named). Having decided to use 'every trick in the bag and some that weren't,' Peterson emerged from his classes with THE CAGE. Here his taste for slapstick had reasserted itself as a modulation of the Surrealist slant...

Two other films, CLINIC OF STUMBLE and HORROR DREAM were made with a friend, Marian Van Tuyl, who was a well known dancer, so he had this particular distraction of making the dance films appropriately worthy of the requirements of another art. Then came THE PETRIFIED DOG in 1948. Literature, as narrative rather than lyric fantasy, now entered the experimental dialectic, enriching his work with a problem he had previously avoided. Yet his quasi-Surrealist method guaranteed that out of Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland he would make no mere 'screen treatment.' THE PETRIFIED DOG shows us a little girl's world transformed before her eyes into a set of puppets behaving in part according to her own wishes, in part according to its own veiled irrationality...

THE PETRIFIED DOG was a Workshop 20 film, as were the two which followed, MR. FRENHOFER AND THE MINOTAUR and THE LEAD SHOES...Aptly enough, he himself says: 'Just as we had scrambled two works of art in FRENHOFER, we combined two ballads in THE LEAD SHOES.' MR FRENHOFER AND THE MINOTAUR not only utilized Balzac's wonderful story about a painter, 'Le Chef-d'oeuvre Inconnu,' which predicted modern abstractionism, but realted this organically to Picasso's 'Minotauromachy,' an etching based on Green myth, in an ingenious way. Furthermore, the unifying cement for it was a sound-track deriving from Joyce's idiom in Finnegans Wake, apparently the disguised interior monologue of a girl art student...Anamorphic photography in the raw was effected in this film by a lens flattening objects sometimes horizontally, sometimes vertically...

Peterson and his students here had the inspiration not merely to merge to old ballads, a version of 'Edward' and 'The Three Ravens,' but also to join this 'perspective-by-incongruity' with a further element: the jam session musical style of a revival meeting. Numerous stories are unfolding at one and the same time throughout the film... Every attempt at symbolic or historical understanding of THE LEAD SHOES is bound to destruct against the multiplicity of meanings, leaving the thoughtful viewer with scattered wits - though not at wit's end - which is another technique Peterson employed in making MR. FRENHOFER AND THE MINOTAUR. The means, or themes, of THE LEAD SHOES are deliberately edited at cross-purposes.

Stan Brakhage speaking of Sidney Peterson: 'Of all the brilliant men interested in film that I have met or heard of, there is none more intelligent that Sidney Peterson. And this intellect, developing along with the shyness, are his two great strengths. The naivete exists in the work, and yet is is extremely ordered in terms of intellect, and as mentioned before, either would be unbearable unless tempered by the other...One can see that he was a man not too much different from Duchamp, and at some point in his life Peterson achieved a similar balance. Peterson's perfection of the medium had reached such a point that to make one more film would have been unbearable. That is, his intelligence would take over and create an imbalance. When that point arrived he gave up films as an art form or as an independent personal expression... '

Stan Brakhage on the naive aspect of Peterson's films: 'I would say the extent to which Peterson's work looks naive would require us to re-define the term...It is the naivete which counterbalances sophisticated imagination - creates a balance that makes it possible to regard Rousseau's paintings as works of art...(T)he manner of Peterson's films is anything but naive. The manner is 'Studied Ambiguity' which is one of the hardest things to accomplish in art. It is just like trying to do 'Articulate Chaos.'" - Notes from Film Culture, No. 19, "Sidney Peterson" by Parker Tyler and Sidney Peterson, a lecture by Stan Brakhage.

This is the final Cineprobe of the season. Cineprobe will resume on October 8 with An Evening With Leo Hurwitz (NATIVE LAND).

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